United Nations E/CN.6/2004/NGO/32

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
23 January 2004

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Forty-eighth session
1-12 March 2004
Item 3 (c) (i) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality

Statement submitted by International Council of Women, International Federation of Settlements and Neighbourhood Centres, Soroptimist International and Zonta International, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; All India Women's Conference, All India Women's Education Fund Association, Baha'i International Community, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas, Femmes afrique solidarité, General Arab Women Federation, Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children, International Council of Jewish Women, International Federation of University Women, Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association International, Pathways to Peace, Socialist International Women, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Women's International Zionist Organization, Women's World Summit Foundation, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, World Movement of Mothers, World Organization Against Torture, World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations and World YWCA, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; and International Association of Gerontology, International Council of Nurses, International Association for Counseling/IRTAC and International Inner Wheel, non-governmental organizations on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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* E/CN.6/2004/1.

04-22094 (E) 120204

The Charter of the United Nations was the first international instrument to recognize women's rights with men, i.e. gender equality, and has created the impulse in providing a legal codification of these rights in national laws and policies. A decade ago in 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna provided the solid basis that clearly acknowledged women's rights are human rights and the Conference emphasized the need for governments and the United Nations to make it their priority to ensure full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life at national, regional and international levels and the elimination of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex. It also underscored the fundamental importance of integrating full participation of women in the development process, which was a reiteration of the Rio Declaration under Agenda 21 Chapter 24.

Attention to gender equality and women's rights to sustainable economic and social development are contained in all recent world conferences and summits, in particular the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995. This has become the blueprint of a framework for translating the provisions and positive forces of human rights law for women into concrete actions. Within this framework is stipulated in Paragraph 25 (to) "Encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards equality." This should be considered in the light of Paragraph 1 which emphasized the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities.

To further clarify these concepts and principles, ECOSOC adopted agreed conclusions in 1997 to promote a coordinated and coherent policy of gender mainstreaming and addressed specific recommendations. It also decided in 2001 to include a regular review of how gender mainstreaming is being implemented.

We have purposely introduced this statement with the above background to show that we have in our hands international instruments, norms, guidelines and processes for fully implementing and fulfilling the goals of gender equality. Why then is it that we are far from achieving this, notably in economic, social and cultural rights.

Allow us to give some indications and observations, to be followed by specific recommendations:

First, a gender perspective is not so much about targeting attention on women as it is to the structures and processes within different sectors which are critical in highlighting imbalances. It is in this context that one can identify the gaps and discriminatory practices which have caused differing rates and levels of socio-economic impact to women and men. For example, eradication of poverty will remain rhetoric if the present consultation process on perceptions, priorities and needs continue to exclude or negatively affect women.

Secondly, issues of representation and access to decision-making and to control over resources continue to be dominated by men because institutions and national legislations do not address or inadequately address these imbalances. Our lives continue to be controlled principally by the male paradigm of vertical pyramid of hierarchical power.

Thirdly, culture and religion are entrenched in behavioural patterns and mental attitudes, which are exacerbated by stereotyping the economic and social roles of women and men. and creating a vicious cycle of discriminatory practices favouring male domination. One such practice is the deprivation of women's rights to land, property and inheritance. Such deprivation of rights to assets are added obstacles to their rights to access credit and other rights to development such as education and training and in turn, creates for them a situation of dependency or unsustainable economic, social and cultural autonomy.

Fourthly, macro economic policies are purported to be gender neutral but are in fact generally gender blind. Current policies are actually reinforcing the exclusion of women in economic development . The non-recognition and undervaluing of household work and other domestic and agricultural work create an unfavourable bias towards women in employment because they are first to suffer precarity, unemployment and opportunistic retrenchment practices, such as in the civil aviation industry after the 11 September 2001 disaster. The non-valuation of women's work has also had negative consequences to the income women earn which range between 20% to 40% below men's income worldwide. These factors are being exacerbated by women's increasing activity in the informal economy which has led to the feminisation of poverty. Should not the reproductive role and double burden of women be taken into macro economic policies instead of simply relegating their contribution at micro level?

Fifthly, balancing work and family life has been the biggest challenge to women in terms of inequalities and forms of discrimination against them. This is based on the perception that women are unable to achieve an adequate and equal performance at work due to their primary commitment to their family and domestic life. This stereotype concept is today obsolete for women are participating longer in economic activities and they represent over 40% of the global labour force according to ILO. They continue to work even after childbearing age to contribute to family income or as sole breadwinners in single headed households or simply as their right to personal development.

We suggest that the Commission on the Status of Women could contribute to challenging and shifting the role of men and boys towards advancing women's economic, social and cultural rights and promoting gender equality through a better understanding and assessment of gender roles and related structural inequalities such as:

1. The roles associated with being male or female in public and private life and the responsibilities assigned to them;

2. The valuation of activities undertaken, i.e. emanating from the socialization processes brought about by the traditional division of labour of income generated outside the household by men and the unpaid work within the household by women;

3. The access to and control over resources and decision-making opportunities;

4. The changing patterns of production and reproduction and their demographic and socio-economic repercussions;

5. The stereotyping of unequal power relations and expectations;

6. The digital divide that exacerbates the gender divide because of language, educational and skills deficits and asymmetric economic power.

We specifically recommend that men's roles should be to:

1. adopt another model that would enhance the quality of their lives through a partnership that would take female lateral system of thinking, doing and caring simultaneously as an added value. This would entail their active involvement in harmonizing and reconciling work and family responsibilities on a shared basis;

2. share the responsibilities of care giving to relieve the disproportionate burden which affects women's ability to access and retain work and girls being forced to drop out of school;

3. increase attention to the role of men in preventing HIV infection among women and girls, especially given the asymmetric power relations and women's subordination and vulnerability to discrimination;

4. challenge the traditional division of labour and stereotypical images and expectations of men as breadwinners or heads of household and fulltime employment;

5. encourage to accept and learn from women's organizational and negotiating skills and acknowledge women's capacity to manage budgets;

6. promote men's parenting role which would give women and girls equal time and opportunity to have a choice of home work or income-generating activities;

7. dismantle the system of the traditional notion of the division of labour and provide an enabling environment for equal opportunity, choice and access of women to personal and sustainable development;

8. work together towards gender equality through policy measures and other actions aimed at overcoming inequalities in rights to land ownership, access to property and inheritance rights;

9. discourage adherence to ideas of inferiority or superiority between sexes brought about by peer pressures, socialization processes and belief systems which are perpetuated by stereotyping roles that exacerbate inequalities.

Finally, Chairperson, we wish to end with the notion that gender equality could never be achieved unless men change their mental attitudes and behaviours of power over women and unless women change their apologetic attitudes and reproval towards themselves.